

The last few weeks have brought renewed hope that the dark days of the BP oil spill will eventually be put behind us. At the same time that local officials were reporting significant increases in summer tourists along the Alabama Gulf Coast, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder visited several of the areas hardest hit by last year's spill, pledging to keep the pressure on the flawed claims process.

The numbers have yet to be tabulated, but it already appears that 2011 will far surpass 2010 in local tourist visits and in dollars spent along the Alabama Gulf Coast. We might even see higher numbers than 2009, when total tourist-rated spending topped \$3.2 billion in southwest Alabama. Barring the distinct possibility of at least one major coastal storm this summer, the outlook for a rebound is looking promising. But for all the optimism, we must not lose sight of the thousands still struggling from the devastating blow of last year's spill and who today are fighting to regain their livelihoods after losses that wiped away their savings.

Recent news reports have commented that the Gulf Coast Claims Facility, which at the request of President Obama has overseen oil spill damage claims payments since last August, is winding down after paying out some \$4 billion and having processed more than 80 percent of submitted claims. This misleading image of progress is exactly what BP, which is liable for the claims payments, and GCCF administrator, Ken Feinberg, who is the conductor of a deliberately slow claims payments system, would want us all to believe.

Looking at the numbers, the GCCF reports that as of last week over 447,000 claims out of a total 520,000 filed have been "resolved." In Alabama, 65,000 claims out of a total 75,000 filed are also reported as "resolved." The GCCF calculates total claims payments at \$4.6 billion. What these figures do not reflect is the number of persons and businesses who have been forced to accept far less restitution due to a tediously slow and maddeningly inconsistent claims processing system.

The GCCF may boast of "processing" 80 percent of claims, but in reality most of this is simply pushing paper and delaying payments to the point of forcing many claimants to accept low-ball payouts just to keep the lights on. Because the GCCF has been able to operate with essentially no oversight of its claims system, it can continue to trickle out payments with the expectation that the Gulf Coast will just tire of the beleaguered process and go away.

Let there be no mistake, South Alabama is unified in holding Mr. Feinberg and the GCCF accountable, and we will not accept anything less than fulfillment of the promise that President Obama made in June of 2010 when he called for those damaged by the oil spill to be made whole. This is the message that I personally conveyed to President Obama's Attorney General when he visited Mobile and Baldwin counties on June 30.

During his visits with local fishermen and officials at Dauphin Island, Gulf Shores and Orange Beach, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder gained a perspective of the human impact of the inefficient GCCF claims system that he acknowledged did not live up to his expectation. "When I promised to come back a year ago, I hoped to see the claims process in better shape," he said.

During my meeting with Mr. Holder I reiterated my request that the U.S. Justice Department call for an independent review of the GCCF. An independent audit is the only way to restore confidence in a \$20 billion claims system funded by BP that has so far only paid out a fraction of the total funds available. I continue to work with my colleagues in Congress and through the appropriations process to demand appropriate federal oversight of the GCCF. Attorney General Holder said he did not want the victims of the oil spill "nickel and dimed," and I believe now is the time to review Mr. Feinberg's books.

July 18 Deadline for Alabama Tornado Damage Claims:

Those who suffered damage from the April 2011 tornadoes across Alabama have until Monday, July 18 to file for assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the U.S. Small Business Administration.

Forty three Alabama counties were affected by the April storms which resulted in the loss of hundreds of lives and devastation across central and northern Alabama. Clarke, Escambia, Monroe and Washington counties here in southwest Alabama also experienced some damage.

Residents of Clarke, Escambia, Monroe and Washington counties who sustained April tornado-related damage and wish to apply for FEMA assistance may call 1-800-621-3362 or visit www.disasterassistance.gov. To apply for SBA low-interest disaster loans, phone 1-800-659-2955 or visit www.sba.gov. Again, the deadline to apply is July 18, 2011.

My staff and I work for you. If we can ever be of service, do not hesitate to call my office toll free at 1-800-288-8721.